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Premarital Sex: Perception, Engagement and Awareness of College Students in Bulan, Sorsogon, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

This study determined the perception of college students towards premarital sex (PMS) amid the continuum of sexual conservatism and liberalism. It also investigated on the engagement and extent of awareness of the students to the various consequences of engaging in PMS. The cross-sectional descriptive study was participated by 320 respondents chosen through cluster random sampling from the different colleges in the town. Results revealed that students continue to hold a conservative view of PMS. However, degree of conservatism has diminished. Immorality and social unacceptability of PMS were *slightly agreed* on; although virginity and sanctity of sex were concepts respondents hold a tight view on. PMS is permissible if done by engaged couples and loving partners. One out of five respondents engaged in PMS which is relatively low compared to the regional and national data. Respondents' awareness of the various consequences of PMS was fairly low with a mean of 1.6 responses, and the most common were, *unwanted pregnancy, sexually-transmitted disease, can affect schooling and social stigma*. This study recommends PMS education and the integration of these results in the content of instruction, focusing on health-related effects of PMS.

Keywords: *premarital sex (PMS), perception, engagement, awareness, college students, Bulan, Sorsogon*

INTRODUCTION

Philippine culture taught the youth the sanctity of marriage. Chastity before marriage is important and sex before marriage is a taboo (Bocar & Perez, 2013). Religion, tradition, beliefs, values and culture have influenced Filipinos' point of view about premarital sex (PMS). The majority of Filipinos regarded sex as an act shared by married couples. Filipinos, particularly women, are expected to keep virginity until the wedding night (Yachiongco, 2010). However, this attitude has dramatically changed over time.

One in three Filipino youth aged 15-24 has engaged in PMS. That finding came from the Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality (YAFS) 4 study in 2013, conducted by University of the Philippines Population Institute (UPPI). UPPI, through its longitudinal YAFS study on youth fertility and sexuality, revealed that youth's involvement in PMS has been steadily increasing.

For less than 20 years, PMS increased by 14%; which from 17% in 1994, 23% in 2002, it became 32% in 2013. In other words, from 1:7 ratio, it became 1:3. This translates to about 6.2 million youth have engaged in premarital sex (UPPI, 2010). According to Prof. Maria Paz Marquez of UPPI, the increasing numbers do not come as a surprise especially if it is linked with what the sexual behavior of young Filipino today. Filipino youth has shown changes in sexual behavior (Barcia, 2014).

In the Bicol region, one in four youth has engaged in sex before marriage, according to YAFS 4 study on the region. It is alarming that 84.6% of first premarital sex encounters are unprotected against pregnancy and STD. According to DOH-Bicol, while fertility rate of all age is declining, aged 15-19 is increasing wherein 7.3% of females are already mothers (Ilas, 2014).

Corollary to the regional survey, the town of Bulan is assumed to have an increasing engagement in PMS among youth and a decreasing level of conservatism towards sexual behavior. Yet, there is no study conducted specific to this geographic part of the region. On the other hand, the town, being located in the countryside and remote from urban cities, is generally considered as embracing conservatism in terms of perception towards all kinds of sexual activities including PMS. PMS is still a cultural and social taboo. People are not open with discussion about sex, much more engagement on the act.

The growth of sexual liberalism in different parts of the world predominantly in the urban areas has slowly reached the countryside and the rural areas. Technology and globalization facilitated the exposure of people from the remote places and rural areas to the different and deviating perspectives on sex. According to a study conducted by Bocar and Perez (2013), mass media is the primary source of information of youth about sex and the least source is their parents. According to Rep. Batocabe, author of the Philippine AIDS Law, technology has influenced the rise of premarital sex. He mentioned the internet and the social media have helped in attracting premarital sex, like the dating apps that are accessible online



(Yapchiongco, 2014). In the town of Bulan, almost all types of communication technologies are available and accessible ranging from the television to the internet. A great number of the residents have an access to social media and almost all have access to television, radio and mobile communication. Bulaneños, in one way or another, have been reached and influenced by the different views on sex.

The study aims to determine the perception, engagement and the awareness of college students towards PMS. Specifically, the study aims to answer the following questions: 1) What is the prevalent perception of students towards PMS? 2) IS there a significant relationship between students' perception and engagement to PMS? 3) Is there a significant difference on students' perception between genders and ages? 4) What is the prevalent knowledge of the students regarding consequences of engagement in PMS?

The study desires to focus on the college students as this demography has a greater exposure to different perspectives of life, much less, of sex. College education offered subjects that include topics of Population Education and Family Planning. However, according to YAFS 4 study, youth with college level/graduate education has 36.2% involvement in PMS which is over the average of 32% (Natividad, 2013). It shows that there is above-average prevalence in this sector of young population in the country. YAFS 4 study further revealed that even the college youth are also unprotected at their first PMS, that is, 67% (Natividad, 2013).

Unprotected sex causes high fertility rate and increasing cases of STD. The latter two are strong indicators of youth unawareness of the consequences of PMS. When perception of the youth of PMS becomes too permissive, rise of engagement rate consequently follows. Yet, if awareness to the risks and effects remains on a constant level, economic, social, moral and physical wellbeing of the Filipinos is at stake.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

The study employed cross-sectional descriptive associational design to determine the students' perception, engagement and awareness to consequences towards premarital sex. It utilized a survey instrument to gather quantitative data. The respondents of the study are the undergraduate students coming from all the four college institutions (HEI) located in the town of Bulan, province of Sorsogon, Philippines. The respondents are chosen through cluster random sampling

technique. Total of 320 questionnaires are prepared and proportionately distributed to the four campuses and equally distributed to male & female respondents.

The questionnaire was divided into 4 parts. First was the respondent's profile—age, sex and year in college. Second was 5-point modified likert scale to determine perception towards PMS. There were 9 statements which respondents evaluated: 1) *PMS is immoral and ethically unacceptable*; 2) *PMS is socially unacceptable*; 3) *Sex is sacred and only for married couples*; 4) *Virginity is important for woman to keep*; 5) *Virginity is important for man to keep until marriage*; 6) *It is alright to engage in PMS as long as couples are engaged*; 7) *It is alright to engage in PMS as long as partners love and faithful to each other*; 8) *It is alright to engage in PMS as long as safe sex is practiced*; 9) *It is alright to engage in PMS as long as both enjoy and agree to it*. Third is a multiple-choice on the respondent's engagement on PMS which were: "No, I will never do it", "No, but I'm open to it", "Yes, done it one time", "Yes, done it few times" and "Yes, done it many times". Fourth was an open-ended question used to determine awareness of respondents to consequences of PMS. Respondents can provide as many answers as possible and are given ample time to respond.

The questionnaire was tested for data relevance. It was pilot tested to a group of college student. Ethical review was also done on the questionnaires by the panel of evaluators. Subsequently, questionnaires were distributed to respondents. Surveys are conducted by the researcher himself to ensure comprehension and ethical compliance. Permits from the dean or school administrators were sought before the conduct of the survey. Ethical consideration was strictly observed in the duration of the study. During survey distribution, participation is asked voluntarily, rationale was explained and confidentiality and anonymity were assured to the respondents.

Mean was obtained to determine perception towards PMS. Mean results were interpreted using the following scale: mean of 1-1.5 is *conservative*; mean of 1.6-3.0 is *slightly conservative*; mean of 3.1-4.5 is *slightly liberal*; and mean of 4.6-5.0 is *liberal*. Frequency count and percentage were used to obtain level of engagement in PMS. To analyse awareness of consequences, frequency count and percentage were used.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Perception of Students towards Premarital Sex

The results revealed that respondents generally held a conservative view on premarital sex. They generally exhibited a slightly conservative view on premarital sex. Table 1 exhibits interpretation of responses on the various statements related to PMS. In terms of immorality and ethical unacceptability of PMS, respondents revealed their slight agreement with a mean of 2.2. In terms of social unacceptability and stigma of PMS, respondents also held a slight agreement with a mean of 2.3. Respondents strongly agreed on the

sanctity of sex – that it is an act exclusive to married couples – with a mean of 1.4. Also, respondents had a very tight view and strong agreement on the importance of woman's virginity with a mean of 1.2, over the importance of man's virginity with a mean of 1.9. On the other hand, in terms of PMS for engaged couples and PMS for loving and faithful partners, respondents were permissive and had slightly agreed on with both having a mean of 3.2. Respondents were nevertheless slight conservative and have slightly disagreed on PMS regardless if partners practice safe sex and regardless if both agree & enjoy it, which garnered a mean of 2.6 and 2.5 respectively.

Table 1. Perception of Respondents towards PMS

	Mean	Interpretation
PMS is immoral	2.2	Slightly Conservative
PMS is socially unacceptable	2.3	Slightly Conservative
Sex is sacred & only for married couples	1.4	Conservative
Virginity is important for woman	1.2	Conservative
Virginity is important for man	1.9	Slightly Conservative
PMS is alright for engaged couples	3.2	Slightly Liberal
PMS is alright for faithful & loving partners	3.2	Slightly Liberal
PMS is alright as long as sex safe is practiced	2.6	Slightly Conservative
PMS is alright as long as both agree & enjoy	2.5	Slightly Conservative
Ave	2.3	Slightly Conservative

Taking the mean of means, respondents garnered a mean of 2.3, which revealed that respondents were slightly conservative and generally perceived PMS as “slightly” unacceptable and improper. What can be observed was that respondents were no longer stringently conservative. There was already a clear indication of open-mindedness about the concept of PMS. The notion that youths living in the countryside and rural areas are conformists and conservative is no longer true. There is already a trace of permissiveness and loosening up of conservatism in the youth. This was clearly shown on the statements—PMS is alright for engaged couples and for faithful partners—as respondents slightly agreed on PMS in these circumstances. On the other hand, there are still traces of conservatism, particularly on the subject of virginity. Respondents ideally value virginity for women and the sanctity of marriage.

The above finding about respondents' perception goes in line with the study of Bocar & Perez (2013) that despite the growing liberalism,

adolescents in the Philippines, particularly in the provinces, generally have a conservative perception on premarital sex. It stated that even in the permissive point in time, students at their late adolescence stage do not absolutely submit to the liberal view of PMS. However, with the intervention of social mass media as the primary source of information, the perception of sex and sexual attitudes has slowly changed to liberalism (Bocar & Perez, 2013).

B. Engagement of Students in PMS

Table 2 shows that the aggregate score of those who engaged in PMS is 19% (*yes, I've done it once; yes I've done it few times; yes I've done it several times*), while those who haven't engaged has total of 81% (*no, I will never do it; no, but I am open to it*). Comparing this data to YAFS 4 study (2013), it is relatively low, which is one in three for national data and one in four for the regional study. This finding is apparently closer to the prevalence of PMS in a huge university in Manila which found that students' engagement in PMS is 27% (De



Jose, 2013). However, this doesn't agree with studies conducted in different countries. Fawole (2010) indicated high involvement of students in PMS of about 64% in Osogbo, Nigeria. Prasad (2014) in his study of PMS prevalence among college students in India found similar result of about one in three (31%), while in Ethiopia, 39% has engaged in PMS among college students (Hurissa, Tebeje, & Megersa, 2014). It could be inferred that the rural youth, particularly those with college education have low engagement in PMS.

Table 2. Engagement towards PMS

	n	%
No, I will never do it	122	39
No, but I am open to it	130	42
Yes, done it once	21	7
Yes, done it few times	26	8
Yes, done it several times	11	4

One interesting result, however, was among those who have not engaged in PMS, a little more than half are open in doing it (Table 2). The overall number of 19% may be low, but behind that percentage, half are already open to do it. It means that given an acceptable reason, respondents would engage in premarital sex. Permissiveness had displayed even by those who had no experience in PMS. Results also revealed that those who have not engaged in PMS, they were not strictly conservative, but merely 'slightly conservative' with a mean of 2.2.

C. Awareness of the Various Consequences of PMS

An open-ended question was used to investigate on how aware were the respondents on the various consequences of engaging in premarital sex. Of all the respondents, only 18% provided four or more responses; 15% provided 3 responses; 27% provided 2 responses; 27% provided 1 response; and 15% provided no response. The misunderstood responses were about 7%.

On an average, number of responses was about 1.6 per student. Of the responses given, "Unwanted or early pregnancy" has the highest frequency answer of 52%; "Sexually Transmitted Disease (STD)" followed with only 31%; "Can affect schooling" came third with 23%; "Social stigma" came fourth with 12%. The following results with less than 10% were – "Guilt/Sin", and "Enjoyment to PMS" (9%), "Poverty" and "Abortion" (6%), "Population Growth" (5%), "Relationship Problems" (3%), "Pregnancy Risks" (2%), and other responses (2%). Details are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Various Consequences of Premarital Sex

Responses	n	%
Unwanted Pregnancy	166	52
STD	99	31
Can Affect Schooling	74	23
Social Stigma	39	12
Guilt/Sin	30	9
Enjoyment to PMS	28	9
Poverty	20	6
Abortion	20	6
Population Growth	17	5
Relationship Problem	10	3
Pregnancy Risks	5	2
Others	6	2

One alarming fact revealed was the respondents' low awareness of the health-related effects of engaging in PMS. Merely one in three (31%) respondents was aware of the risk of STD. Only 2% were aware of the pregnancy risks one may encounter due to immature body state. According to WebMD.com (2014), teen pregnancy faces multiple higher risks and complications due to immature physical state, such as pregnancy-induced hypertension, premature birth, low-birth-weight, post-partum depression, etc.

This research revealed that respondents were barely aware of the health risks of engaging in PMS. Moreover, results revealed that even those who had engaged in PMS, only 29% exhibited awareness of STD as a consequence. This explained that with this level of awareness, fertility rate and STD will continue to rise in the coming years, not only in the urban areas, but also in the countryside regions. In the town of Bulan, it showed that students and youth, despite college education, were scarcely aware of the menace of STD.

The said findings corroborate with the YAFS 4 study conducted by UPPI that only 40% were aware of STD as a consequence of PMS (Ong & Tolentino, 2014). Compared with the national data, it further revealed that youth in the provinces have a lower awareness of STD. Further, the findings also relate with the study of Fawole (2010), in Oson State, Nigeria that female students had low awareness of the health-related effects of PMS that only 27% showed awareness to STD and 12% to pregnancy complications.



This study found that the diminishing level of conservatism of the respondents and becoming sexually open-minded towards PMS did not evidently impact the level of awareness to PMS' consequences. The exposure to mass media (according to the study of Bocar and Perez, 2013) and the integration to curriculum of some courses did not provide substantial impact to the level of awareness. Respondents continued to gradually change their perception towards PMS, yet their level of awareness had been left to a relatively low level.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, it is concluded that respondents generally perceived PMS with a slight conservatism. It can be observed that the degree of conservatism in the Filipino youth had already diminished; including those coming from the provinces and the rural areas; but it had not come across the border of liberalism. Respondents slightly agreed on the immorality and the social unacceptability of PMS, although they held a tight view on the concepts of virginity and sanctity of sex. But, they had already slightly

permitted PMS, if it is done by engaged couples and by faithful partners. The slight conservatism view agreed with the respondents' relatively low engagement in PMS. However, it is disturbing to learn that the extent of awareness of the respondents to the various consequences of PMS was low, particularly on the health-related effects of PMS such as STD and teen pregnancy risks.

As an output to this study, an awareness program was designed and expected to broaden and intensify the awareness of the students to the ill-effects of PMS. The proposed symposia aimed to not only heighten awareness to the consequences and risks but also to re-orient students to proper sexual values. The symposia aimed to bridge the gap that this study had established, that is, when the awareness to the ill-effects of PMS is high, the well-being of the youth is safeguarded. The study also recommends that the local government, social welfare and NGOs should collaborate in intensifying the fight against STD, HIV/AIDS especially with the youth. Future research should be conducted on many issues related to PMS and its health-related effects, such as teen-age pregnancy, HIV, and STDs.

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